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ON THE ALTERNATION BETWEEN INFLECTIONAL CASE AND PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES IN ROMANIAN

ALEXANDRU MARDALE

ABSTRACT

The goal of this paper is to examine the alternation between nominal expressions marked with morphological case (e.g. *fiul regelui “the king’s son”) and certain prepositional phrases (e.g. *fiul de rege “the royal son”) in Romanian. We will show that the two types of constructions are alike insofar as they involve a relation which may either pertain to the lexical meaning of the head N or else be contextually triggered by the presence of the second argument. We will also observe that they differ regarding the nature of the second argument: a strong correlation can be shown to exist between syntactic categories (DPs vs. NPs), Case marking (morphological vs. prepositional) and semantic type (individuals vs. properties).

KEYWORDS

(inflectional/morphological) case, preposition(s), entity, property

1 Introduction

1.1 What is case?

Traditionally, case is a morphological notion that refers to an inflectional morpheme occurring on N(oun)s or on other constituents of the N(oun) P(hrase) / D(eterminer) P(hrase) (e.g., D, A(djectives), Quant(fiers), Num(erals)).

For instance, in English and French, the inflectional morpheme varies with the position of the (pro)noun in the sentence. As shown in the following examples, the pronoun is Nominative when preverbal (i.e. Subject) and it is Accusative when postverbal or postNominative (i.e. Direct Object):

(1) a. John loves Mary. (English)
   b. HeNom loves herAcc.
   c. *HerAcc loves heNom.

(2) a. Jean regarde Marie. (French)
   b. IlNom laAcc regarde.
   c. *LaAcc regarde ilNom.

On the contrary, in languages like Russian, the inflectional morpheme attaches to all NPs / DPs (and their constituents) in the sentence (apud Matushansky (2007)):

(3) Eta talantlivaja studentka znaet dvux lingvistov. (Russian)

This talented student knows two linguists.

more specific notion that refers to a theory dealing with the assignation of the so-called *abstract case*.

*Abstract case* is a (syntactic) property of nominal expressions that reflects their relation with a Specifier or with some Head. Abstract case may (or may not) have a morphological (i.e. inflectional) realization.

In other words, *morphological case* is an overt realisation of abstract case. The following examples from Latin illustrate this possibility:

(4) a. **Pater filium amat.**
father\textsubscript{Nom} son\textsubscript{Acc} loves
The father loves his son.

b. **Patrem filius amat.**
father\textsubscript{Acc} son\textsubscript{Nom} loves
The son loves his father.

1. 2 A few remarks about case in Romanian

Romanian is a Romance language which partially inherits morphological cases from Latin, namely the Dative case and the Genitive case which are homonymous.

Dative is assigned in verbal constructions (5), while Genitive is assigned in nominal constructions (6):

(5) **am dat (cărți) regelui**
have give\textsubscript{PastPart} books king-the\textsubscript{Dat}
I gave (some books) to the king.

(6) **cărțile regelui**
books-the king-the\textsubscript{Gen}
The king’s books.

The difference between Dative and Genitive is visible when substituting by a (personal / possessive) pronoun as in the examples below:

(7) **i-am dat (cărții) lui / *sale**
him\textsubscript{CL}-have give\textsubscript{PastPart} (books) he\textsubscript{Dat} / he\textsubscript{Gen}
I gave him (some books).

(8) **cărțile lui / sale**
books-the he\textsubscript{Gen} / he\textsubscript{Gen}
His books.

Nominative and Accusative are also homonymous, but – unlike Dative and / or Genitive – they do not have a morphologically marked form (see (9) – (10) below), with the exception of certain forms of the personal pronouns in Accusative. The latter situation is illustrated in (11):

(9) **Studentul vizitează profesorul.**
Student-the\textsubscript{Nom} visits professor-the\textsubscript{Acc}
The student is visiting the teacher.

(10) **Profesorul vizitează studentul.**
professor-the\textsubscript{Nom} visits student-the\textsubscript{Acc}
The teacher is visiting the student.
(11) a.  **Tu / *tine** vii la conferință.  (Nominative)
     youNom youAcc come to conference
     You are coming to the conference.
b.  Vin la conferință cu **tine / *tu.**  (Accusative)
     come to conference with youAcc youNom
     I am coming to the conference with you.

In what follows, this paper focuses exclusively on the analysis of Dative and Genitive.

1.3 The puzzle

Among its morphological case paradigm, Romanian displays a remarkable alternation between nominal expressions marked for Dative or Genitive and P(prepositional) P(hrase)s headed by one of the functional prepositions a, de or la.

This phenomenon appears systematically in the case of Genitive which alternates with PPs headed by the preposition de. This can be seen in the following examples:

(12) a. aceasta este camera oaspeților de la nunta Mariei (Genitive)
     this is room-the guests-theGen of at marriage-the MaryGen
     This is the room of the guests from Mary’s marriage.
b. aceasta este camera de oaspeți la care am visat întotdeauna
     this is room-the DE guests to which have dreamPastPart always
     This is the guests’ room which I always dreamed of.

The above-mentioned alternation is nevertheless much more restricted in the case of Genitive which alternates with PPs headed by the preposition a (see the constructions in (13) below), or in the case of Dative which alternates with PPs headed by the preposition la (see the constructions in (14)):

(13) a. deportarea evreilor / *a evrei (Genitive)
     deportation-the Jews-theGen A Jews
     The deportation of the Jews.
b. deportarea a zece evrei / *zecilor evrei
     deportation-the A ten Jews ten-theGen Jews
     The deportation of ten Jews.

(14) a. s-a adresat participanților / ??la participanți (Dative)
     s-Refl has addressPastPart participants-theDat LA participants
     (S)he addressed to the participants.
b. s-a adresat la cinci participanții / *cincilor participanți
     s-Refl has addressPastPart LA five participants five-theDat participants
     (S)he has addressed to five participants.

The goal of the next paragraphs is to discuss the conditions under which these alternances occur in Romanian, on the one hand, and to propose an analysis for each of these constructions, on the other hand.
2 Case-marking and prepositional-marking of DPs

2.1 DPs marked for Genitive and PPs headed by a

As shown in (13) above, adnominal constituents marked with morphological Genitive may alternate with PPs headed by the functional preposition a. Note that this alternation is not free, but it is constrained by the form of the first constituent in the DP as follows:

(i) if the first constituent of the DP is invariable (i.e., cannot take the inflectional morphemes), a-marking is obligatory. The next paradigm illustrates some cases of invariables constituents that trigger obligatorily prepositional marking: numerals (15a), the universal quantifier tot ‘whole’ (15b), the pronoun ceea ce ‘what’ (15c):

(15) a. familile a doi elevi
families-the A two pupils
The families of two pupils.
b. adunarea a tot satul
assembly-the A whole village-the
The assembly of the whole village.
c. consecința a ceea ce s-a spus mai devreme
consequence-the A what seRefPast has sayPastPart more early
The consequence of what has been said earlier.

NB! It is important to point out that the case of the constituent preceded by a is a default case which is generally associated to Accusative:

(15’) a. adunarea a tot satul
assembly-the A wholeAcc village-the
The assembly of the whole village.
b. *adunarea a totilui satul
assembly-the A whole-theGen village-the

(ii) if the first constituent of the DP is variable (i.e., can take the inflectional morpheme), case-marking is obligatory as shown in (16) below:

(16) a. familia fiecărui elev
family-the everyGen pupil
The family of every pupil.
b. lectura unei cărți
reading-the aGen booksGen
The reading of a book.

However, there is a small number of constituents that may allow both case-marking (see the examples in (17) below) and a-marking (see the examples in (18) below):

(17) a. familiile câtorva elevi
families-the someGen pupils
The families of some pupils.
b. adăugarea unui pic de zahăr
addition-the aGen little of sugar
The addition of a little quantity of sugar.

(18) a. familiile a câtiva elevi
families-the A some pupils
The families of some pupils.

b. adăugarea a un pic de zahăr (apud Giurgea (work in progress))
addition-the A a little of sugar
The addition of a little quantity of sugar.

2.2 DPs marked for Dative and PPs headed by la

As it has been shown in (14) above, nominal constituents marked with Dative may alternate with PPs headed by the functional preposition la.

This alternation observes the same constrains as the ones examined in the previous section:

(i) if the first constituent of the DP is invariable, prepositional marking with la is obligatory (19):

(19) a. am dat (diplome) la doi elevi have givePastPart diplomas LA two pupils I have given diplomas to two pupils.
b. m-am adresat la tot satul meRefI-have addressPastPart LA whole village-the I spoke to the whole village.
c. s-a opus la ceea ce s-a spus mai devreme seRefI-has opposePastPart LA what seRefI-has sayPastPart more early (S)he opposed to what has been said earlier.

(ii) if the first constituent of the DP is variable, case-marking is obligatory (20):

(20) a. am dat (diplome) unui elev have givePastPart diplomas aDat pupil I gave diplomas to a pupil.
b. m-am adresat întregului sat meRefI-have addressed entire-theDat village I spoke to the whole village.
c. s-a opus tuturor lucrurilor spuse mai devreme seRefI-has opposePastPart allDat things-theDat saidFemPl more early (S)he opposed to all the things said earlier.

Notice that a limited number of constituents may allow both case-marking (see the examples in (21) below) and la-marking (see the examples in (22) below):

(21) a. a telefonat câtorva colegi has phonePastPart someDat colleagues (S)he called some colleagues.
b. a acordat premii fiecăruia elev has awardPastPart prices everyDat pupil (S)he gave prices to every pupil.

(22) a. a telefonat la câțiva colegi has phonePastPart LA some colleagues (S)he called some colleagues.
b. ??a acordat premii la fiecare elev has awardPastPart LA every pupil
(S)he gave prizes to every pupil.

2.3 Towards a generalisation

In the light of the data examined above, we can now tempt to propose the following generalisation with respect to case-marking of DPs (i.e. nouns having a D) in Romanian:

(23) a. DPs having a variable constituent on the first position are morphologically case-marked;
b. DPs having an invariable constituent on the first position are prepositionally case marked.

3 Case-marking and prepositional-marking of NPs

3.1 The data

As illustrated in the examples (12) above, adnominal constituents marked with Genitive systematically alternate with PPs headed by the functional preposition de.

This phenomenon appears with several types of nouns: relational nouns (24a), deverbal nouns (24b), picture nouns (24c), object denoting nouns (24d):

(24) a. fiul regelui vs. fiul de rege
    son-the king-the_Gen
    The son of the king.
    son-the DE king
    The royal son.
b. construirea caselor vs. construirea de case
    building-the houses-the_Gen
    The building of the houses.
    building-the DE houses
    The houses building.
c. fotografia grupului vs. fotografia de grup
    picture-the group-the_Gen
    The picture of the group.
    picture-the DE group
    The group’s picture.
d. ușa bisericii vs. ușa de biserică
    door-the church-the_Gen
    The door of the church.
    door-the DE church
    The church’s door.

Both types of construction express similar (lexical) semantic values: alienable possession (25a), inalienable possession (25b), human relationship (25c), goal (25d), content (25e), location (25f), time (25g):

(25) a. curtea împăratului / curtea de împărat
    court-the emperor-the_Gen
    The court of the emperor.
    court-the DE emperor
b. gulerul câmâșii / gulerul de câmâșă
    collar-the shirts-the_Gen
    The collar of the shirt.
    collar-the DE shirt
c. nepotul unchiului / nepotul de unchi
    nephew-the uncle-the_Gen
    The nephew of the uncle.
    nephew-the DE uncle
d. camera oaspeților / camera de oaspeți
    room-the guests-the_Gen
    The room of the guests.
The guests’ room.
e. 
ostrovul florilor / ostrovul de flori 
isle-the flowers-theGen isle-the DE flowers
The isle of the flowers.
f. 
aerul muntelui / aerul de munte 
air-the mountain-theGen air-the DE mountain
The mountain air.
g. 
căldura verii / căldura de vară 
heat-the summers-theGen heat-the DE summer
The summer heat.

3.2 Formal constraints

It is important to point out that the two types of adnominal constituents mentioned above obey
to different formal constraints than the ones examined in § 2:
(i) adnominal constituents marked with Genitive are necessarily nouns with a
determiner:

(26) a. fiul regelui / fiul unui rege
son-the king-theGen son-the aGen king
The king’s son.
b. *fiul rege
son-the king

(ii) in contrast, adnominal constituents marked with de are necessarily nouns without
determiner, regardless of its nature (27a), but can have (adjectival or prepositional) modifiers
(27b-c):

(27) a. *fiul de regele / *fiul de un rege
son-the DE king-the son-the DE a king
b. fiul de rege african
son-the DE king African
The African royal son.
c. construirea de case din lemn
building-the DE houses of wood
The wooden houses building.

In other words, adnominal constituents marked with Genitive are full nominal expressions
(i.e., DPs), while adnominal de-marked constituents are incomplete nominal expressions (i.e.,
NPs).

3.3 Idiomatic expressions

There are exceptions to the free substitution between the constructions with morphological
Genitive and the constructions with the preposition de, namely compounds.
On the one hand, there are constructions taking only the Genitive-marking and
disallowing de-marking. The following paradigm illustrates this possibility:

(28) a. floarea soarelui vs. *floarea de soare
flower-the sun-theGen flower-the DE sun
On the other hand, there are constructions – such as the ones illustrated in (29) below – taking only the de-marking and disallowing Genitive-marking:

(29) a. floarea de colț vs. *floarea colțului
flower-the DE corner
Edelweiss.

b. laptele de pasăre vs. *laptele păsării
milk-the DE bird
A cake made with eggs and milk.

c. dintele de lapte vs. *dintele laptelui
tooth-the DE milk
Milk tooth.

As in the case of the systematic alternations (see the previous sections), the choice between case-marking and de-marking for compounds is strictly correlated to the categorial status of the adnominal constituent. More precisely, DPs are case-marked, while NPs are de-marked.

However, since we are dealing with idiomatic constructions, we may be tempted to think that the choice of one or another type of marking depends on extralinguistic factors.

Indeed, nominal expressions referring to kinds or to unique entities (such as the sun, the devil, the Virgin Mary) are generally realized as DPs (i.e., nouns with the definite article), hence case-marking occurs.

In contrast, nominal expressions referring to non unique entities (such as birds, corners, milk) may be realized as NPs, hence de-marking occurs.

### 3.4 Towards a generalisation

The data examined in this section allow us to propose the following revisited generalisation:

(30) a. An adnominal nominal projection is (morphologically) case-marked if it is a DP with a variable constituent on the first position (cf. (23a) above);

b. An adnominal nominal projection is (prepositionally) marked by de if it is an NP.

### 3.5 Syntactic structure and interpretation

The contrast described above between case-marking of DPs and prepositional marking of NPs may be represented in a twofold manner.

From a syntactic point of view, the following representations may be proposed:
The structure given in (31) differs from the one in (32) with respect to the categorial nature of the embedded constituent: PPs headed by a so-called „functional” preposition in (31) and DPs carrying the inflectional morpheme in (32).

They also differ from a semantic point of view: while in the constructions with Genitive the head N denotes a relation between two individuals (the one denoted by DP₁ and the one denoted by DP₂) (see Beyssade & Dobrovie-Sorin (2005)), in prepositionally marked constructions, the head N denotes a relation between an individual (denoted by DP₁) and a property (denoted by NP₂) (see Kolliakou (1999), Mardale (2007)).

**NB!** In old Romanian, as well as in some contemporary regional dialects, there are constructions in which adnominal *de*-constituents may have an <e>-type denotation. Note however that in that case, *de* introduces a DP headed by the indefinite article (not a NP):

(A) a.  
\[ \text{c-ar pierdut urma } d-o câprioară} \]  
that-AUXPast.Cond be lost the.DE-aFEM.SG deer  
... that (s)he would lost the track of a deer  
b.  
\[ \text{o coadă de un } \text{topor} \]  
aFEM.SG handle.DE anMASC.SG axe  
a handle of an axe

### 3.6 Distributional constraints

The correlations established in the previous sections explain a number of distributional constraints. In what follows, we will examine these constraints.

#### 3.6.1 Distribution in predicate position

Adnominal constituents marked with Genitive case cannot appear after the copula:

(33) a.  
\[ *\text{fiul este regelui} \]  
son-the is the.king-theGen  
b.  
\[ *\text{fotografia este grupului} \]  
picture-the is the.group-theGen  
c.  
\[ *\text{uşa este bisericii} \]  
door-the is the.churches-theGen

In order for them to appear after the copula, we need to insert the so-called genitive article *al*, *a*, *ai*, *ale* (made up of the preposition *a* followed by the definite article) in front of the Genitive DP:

---

1 By predicate position we understand post-copular position.
In contrast, we can observe that *de*-marked constituents can appear after the copula (35):

(35) a.  fiul este de rege (nu de sclav)
son-the is DE king (not DE slave)
This is a royal son (not a slave son).
b.  ușa este de biserică (nu de casă)
door-the is DE church (not DE house)
This is a church door (not a house door).

### 3.6.2 Alternance with APs

Certain *de*-marked constituents may alternate with an AP (36), while Genitive-marked constituents may not do so:

(36) a.  fiul de rege → fiul regal
son-the DE king
The royal son.
b.  ușa de biserică → ușa bisericească
door-the DE church
door-the church Adj
The ecclesiastic door.

### 3.6.3 Alternation with pronouns

Adnominal constituents marked with Genitive case may alternate with personal pronouns (which are equally marked with Genitive case):

(37) a.  fiul regelui → fiul lui
son-the king-the Gen
The king’s son.
b.  ușa bisericii → ușa ei
door-the church-the Gen
door-the her Gen
Its door.

In contrast, *de*-marked constituents cannot alternate with personal pronouns.

### 3.6.4 Anaphora

The complement of *de*-marked constituents cannot serve as anaphoric antecedents for another DP (38). In other words, *de*-marked constituents are not referential. For instance, in (38a) the relative care „thay” cannot refer to the adnominal constituent *(de) rege „royal”* since the latter denoted a quality (i.e. a property) and not an individual. In this sense, compare the construction given in (38a) with the one in (38b):
(38)  a.  *El este fiul de [rege], pe care tânăra speră să îi întâlnească.  
he is son-the DE [king], PEAcc whichi youngwoman-the hopes that himi meet
b.  El este [fiul de rege], pe care tânăra speră să îi întâlnească.  
he is [son-the DE king], PEAcc whichi youngwoman-the hopes that himi meet
He is the royal son that the youngwoman hopes to meet.

In constrast, the adnominal constituents marked with Genitive may serve as antecedents for anaphoric pronouns since the Genitive marked constituents denote individuals (see (39)). In other words, constituents marked with Genitive are referential:

(39)  a.  i.  El este fiul regelui pe care tânăra speră să îi întâlnească.  (ambiguous)  
he is son-the king-theGen PEAcc whichi youngwoman-the hopes to himi meet  
He is the son of the king that the youngwoman hopes to meet.
ii.  El este fiul [regelui], pe care tânăra speră să îi întâlnească.  
he is son-the king-theGen PEAcc whichi youngwoman-the hopes to himi meet
iii.  El este [fiul regelui], pe care tânăra speră să îi întâlnească.  
he is [son-the king-theGen], PEAcc whichi youngwoman-the hopes that himi meet
b.  i.  Ea este fiica [profesorului], pe care i-am văzut ieri.  (non ambiguous)  
she is daughter-the teacher-theGen PEAcc whichCLj has see pastpart yesterday
ii.  Ea este [fiica profesorului], pe care am văzut-o ieri.  
she is [daughter-the teacher-theGen], PEAcc whichCLj has see pastpart-her yesterday
She is the daughter of the teacher that I saw yesterday.

3.7  To sum up

The following table summarizes the results of this section.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Genitive-marked constituents</th>
<th>adnominal $de$-marked constituents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>have a D(eterminer)</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>denote properties</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>can appear in predicate position</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>can alternate with APs</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>can alternate with pronouns</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>can be antecedents for anaphoric pronouns</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3 Conclusion

The constructions analyzed here are alike insofar as they involve a relation (which may either pertain to the lexical meaning of the head N or else be contextually triggered by the presence of the second argument).

They differ regarding the nature of the second argument: a strong correlation can be shown to exist between syntactic categories (DPs vs. NPs), Case marking (morphological vs. prepositional) and semantic type (type <e> vs. type <e, t>).

5 Selected references